



## Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays

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Volume 2 Cohort 14

Article 9

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6-2-2017

# ROOT.ED: A Story That Reconnects

Liz Blackman

*Western Washington University*

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### Recommended Citation

Blackman, L. (2017). ROOT.ED: A Story That Reconnects. *Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays*, 2(1), 12-21. Retrieved from <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss/vol2/iss1/9>

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## **ROOT.ED: A Story That Reconnects**

Liz Blackman, Western Washington University

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine grief and despair as entry points toward compassion and environmental renewal. When sharing our own stories of grief and healing we access our deep roots as communities of interconnected Beings and find our way to Active Hope. Ecological grief plays a critical role in the environmental destruction of our time and by interrogating our own death denial and despair paradigms through communal story-sharing we can move away from apathy and toward more impactful environmental education. Below I share my own Root.ED journey from interconnection through grief to healing and compassionate renewal and how the very act of story sharing changes our relationships with the greater ecological community around us.*

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**Keywords: rooted, environment, education, interconnection, ecotheology, indigeneity, compassion, community, healing, renewal**

*My journey begins with a waking dream. In this vision I am older, wiser, more connected, and I am sitting deep in the woods surrounded by a circle of young children. As our voices rise and fall in the shadow-play of the forest, my roots, the roots of a great tree, spread out beneath me until they touch the base of each child, nourishing them with a steady blue light. This is my vision for Root.ED. This is my vision for myself and all who I touch. I wish to be a great tree in the forest weaving my roots together with those of the other budding spirits around me. What is my process of tree-becoming? Who and what provides critical nourishment?*

*Liz Blackman, Transformative Inquiry Journal, October, 12, 2015.*

Hermann Hesse describes trees as "the most penetrating of preachers." Speaking with reverence as he describes how,

*in their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves.*

He goes on to celebrate trees as sanctuaries and bastions of connection and suggests that, "Whoever has learned how to listen

to trees no longer wants to be a tree. [S]he wants to be nothing except what [s]he is. That is home. That is happiness."

Trees have been teaching, comforting and healing me for decades. Their leaves whispering in the autumn air, their bark cloaking them in intricate patterns of protection, a blanket ecosystem of moss, lichen and a myriad of tiny biota. But their roots, their roots speak to me most of all. Roots represent a remarkable example of the interconnected reality of all life on our planet. They have a great deal to teach us in this time of environmental destruction and human suffering. They inspire my work daily with their vulnerable power and the marvelous neural pathway of mycelia linking the root system of an entire forest, connecting each member of the ecological community to the nourishment of the forest floor and the needs of each neighbor and relation. Studies show us that through these rooted networks, a tree can sense the needs and wounds of a forest neighbor instantly and share necessary healing resources and energy for communal wellness. We have much to learn from the kingdom of Plantae on our journey to planetary healing and renewal, a journey into our own rooted ways of Being.

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### **The Roots of Compassionate Interconnection**

Trees are a wonderful entry point into the concept of compassionate interconnection.

Interconnection, a traditionally Buddhist principle, was first introduced to me during my religious studies undergraduate experience. Interconnection is awakening to the truth of our radical Oneness and a deep interrelation that invites co-creation and healing wholeness. Interconnection has deep roots in Eastern spiritual traditions as well as in indigenous ways of knowing and even in Judeo-Christian philosophy.

We find interconnection in mystical interpretations of the Earth but also in ecological principles and in advanced physics. We now know that beyond our shared humanness, we are linked inextricably with All and we are constantly in the process of Becoming. Though we embrace interconnection as a reality of all life on this planet, embodying it can be immensely painful. In order to actively engage with this radical Oneness we must not only feel the deep life-giving energy of Earth but also grieve the suffering of all Beings. This requires an active engagement with death. Sogyul Rinpoche suggests,

*Fear of death and ignorance of the afterlife are fueling that destruction of our environment that is threatening all of our lives. So isn't it all the more disturbing that people are not taught what death is, or how to die? Or given any hope in what lies after death, and so what really lies behind life? Could it be more ironic that young people are so highly educated in every subject except the one that holds the key to the entire meaning of life, and perhaps to our very survival?*

What Sogyul Rinpoche is speaking to here is the profound interrelationship between death denial and planetary destruction. While for Sogyul Rinpoche, an embracing of the afterlife is integral to a full acceptance of and dance with death, I would argue that many other entry points serve the same purpose. Though I do not find belief in an afterlife to be vital for this work, I do find open and honest conversations and communal and personal grief rituals to be key in guiding our various awakenings to the impermanence and interconnection of all life and the boundless nature of mind. Trees provided some of my most vivid opportunities for awakening to this compassionate interconnection and the dynamic landscape of root systems gifted me the framework for the despair work ahead. In order to engage with Root.ED ideas and communities, we must first understand the extraordinary gift economy that is the forest ecosystem.

Humans much like trees, are inextricably linked to one another and to the Earth. How does our inherent interconnection relate to larger questions of planetary resilience and the relevance of despair work in our time? Recently I listened to a fascinating interview with Rachel Yehuda on the podcast series OnBeing with Krista Tippett. Rachel Yehuda, PhD, Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, is the Director of the Traumatic Stress Studies Division at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Yehuda works in the fascinating and emergent field of epigenetics. According to Krista Tippett,

*Genetics describes DNA sequencing, but the new field of epigenetics sees that genes can be turned on and off and expressed differently through changes in environment and behavior. And Rachel Yehuda is a pioneer in understanding how the effects of stress and trauma can transmit biologically, beyond cataclysmic events, to the next generation. She studied the children of Holocaust survivors and the children of pregnant women who survived the 9/11 attacks. But her science is a form of power for flourishing beyond the traumas – large and small – that mark each of our lives and those of our families and communities.*

The implications of Yehuda's work carry over into conversations about environmental despair and resilience. If we take the perspective of radical Oneness, of compassionate interconnection as outlined above and modeled for us by the Root.ED networks of the forest, then we must acknowledge that suffering and loss of all kinds impact us. Environmental degradation, then, is a deep source of trauma and despair in our world and we will transmit this to future generations if we do not work to heal ourselves and our communities.

The dramatic rise in environmental destruction post Industrial Revolution and the ensuing interpersonal conflicts of worldwide war and violence leave deep open wounds on our collective psyche. If, as Yehuda outlines, we inherit trauma from our parents and this trauma impacts our ability to process stress and therefore to be resilient, then we are in critical need of conversations about grief and despair in our world. Frank Kafka as quoted by Joanna Macy, reminds us that, "you can hold yourself back from the suffering of the world: this is something you are free to do...but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid." With monumental

changes to the vital systems of our planet and a ceaseless pressure toward further destruction, how should we as humans respond? Our paralysis in the face of cataclysmic climate change rides squarely on the shoulders of the deep ecological grief and despair we as a culture experience when we attempt to fathom the impending devastation.

Joanna Macy, in her work *World as Lover World As Self*, identifies "despair work" as one of the greatest needs of our time and describes grief as a gateway to compassion. Through her lens as Buddhist eco theologian she explores turning into our grief as a process of awakening to the depths of our connection to that which we are mourning. She suggests that by speaking the truth of our suffering and holding space for the suffering of our communities through shared grief rituals we can step into the exponentially greater compassion and empathy with grief as guide. She teaches that without turning into our grief and engaging its depths we cannot transform that energy into action. She explains that through communal rituals of truth telling we can finally gain the "higher psychic structures and awareness" needed to move forward into an unknown and frightening future. This concept of sharing in despair represents key steps toward a new social prescription for grief that engages the ecological degradation and dislocation with the natural world that defines this century. I know this grief intimately.

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### ***The Bark of Grief***

Here is what I know about grief. Grief is both incredibly personal and also deeply influenced by the community from which you come. Grief is universal. Grief is felt across species. We have deeply embedded grief frameworks in the United States. Our relationship to and relative denial of death formulates these grief frameworks. Grief is an impermanent transitory state of Being. Overwhelming grief can lead to apathy as evidenced in Kari Noorgaard's work *Living in Denial*. I also know how grief feels in me because last November I found myself darkly amused to discover I was grieving.

Why amused? Because I spent my entire undergraduate experience studying and writing about the intricacies of grief and mourning rituals and practice and yet, when I was mired in my own grief, it took me months to see it clearly.

Why was I grieving? Because I felt deeply disconnected from myself and from the earth. Because after more than a year living in the North Cascades National Park as an integral member of a remote ecologically rich community I suddenly found myself bombarded by heart-wrenching stories of planetary devastation and immense suffering.

Every story I read, watched or listened to was a story of violence or a story of detached inaction. It was crushing. We are so inundated by these two parallel stories of our time, one of "business as usual" and the other of "the great unraveling" (total human-caused planetary devastation) that we are swallowed at once by immense grief

and the desire to return to the security and normalcy of every day life. So we choose. We choose one story or the other and we move forward either with blinders of self-preservation or with immense fear and anger which leads to the wildly inappropriate and destructive power struggles and scapegoating that we take for granted as necessary aspects of being human.

But what if we could step outside these stories, let down the thick bark exterior of self-preservation and sink our roots deep into the soil of community? If this community is isolated deep in the stunning forests and lush habitats of the North Cascades like mine was, you feel safe, you feel nourished, you feel the immeasurable comfort of ecological wholeness, the radical Oneness of interconnection. But what if, after setting your energetic system to "open" you come down out of the mountains and your roots are suddenly exposed to the suffering of the greater global community?

To the stories described above but without the numbing distractions and self-preservation tactics of emotional isolation and intentional ignorance that constant exposure to suffering necessitates. What if you are now plugged into the information superhighway after more than a year of technological isolation and reawaken to the stories of our time? I felt obliterated. My body ached, my mind churned, my heart raced and the stillness of the mountains gave way to the chaos of painful connection. I know the signature of grief. After nearly a decade of study I recognize its calling cards: sleeplessness, apathy, physical exhaustion and pain, depressive episodes, anger, detachment, weight gain/loss, disinterest in previously loved activities, isolation from friends and family and on and on.

As I awakened to my own completely reasonable grief response, I felt helpless to mourn and renew. I felt shut off. My roots no longer felt safe and nourished. The enriching vulnerability of the previous year seemed like a terrible mockery when facing my very real and palpable suffering. How do I find my way through grief when it has moved from an abstract topic of study into a major antagonist of my personal narrative? And more importantly, how does that path toward healing and renewal translate to a diverse world ripe with despair and suffering? How does someone with the privileges of education, supportive family, nature access, nourishing community, and financial resources share the bounty of healing with those of lesser privilege or with those reclining above the mire of global suffering? This question shattered me.

As my worlds converged, slamming together somewhere between grief and environmental renewal I found my life's work unfurling before me in the form of Root.ED: a business, a name, a model that has been a character in the story of my life for nearly seven years. I have work to do. In another profound gift of insight I found an avenue of inquiry toward my own Root.ED story, and in this way, by turning into and asking questions of my own suffering and grief I found deep insight into my work that reconnects and into deep compassion for the world around me. I know how to go forth and feel a flood of energy toward this form of active hope. Joanna Macy defines Active Hope as hope that is practiced. The three steps are as follows:

1. Take a clear view of reality: I am grieving
2. Identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed: I wish to share the story of my ongoing journey toward grief and renewal with the world in accessible, authentic, and emergent ways in order to heal myself, my community, and the planet.
3. Take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction: Investigating and opening my roots to the nourishment and needs of my greater planetary community through reading and listening to others' rooted stories and actively sharing what I've learned. Additionally, seeking avenues for living in a connected, communal way that nourishes me so that I may serve as a teacher, healer, storyteller, and truth-teller. This means living close to the land and investing in sustainable and resilient ways of living and Being that include: growing food, inviting the wisdom of elders, holding space for the learning, healing and connecting of communities large and small, speaking truth, being actively compassionate, honoring the animacy of all Beings, and seeing with Two-Eyes (the polished lens of science and the deep listening of Indigenous ways of knowing as introduced by Robin Wall Kimmerer).

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### **The Story of Root.ED**

Have you ever felt a calling thrumming beneath the surface of your heart? Tugging at you and appearing in every moment of your day? You see evidence of the calling in your neighborhood, in your partner, in the books you read and podcasts you listen to. This is your spirit calling you to you. Inviting you to dance with your higher self. I have felt for some time that I am a steward of something much larger and greater than myself and carrying that vision responsibly and with integrity is profoundly challenging. Root.ED came to me in an explosion of insight several years ago at what some would describe as the most successful point in my life thus far. I was an industry-recognized leader in social engagement strategies, the Operations Director for an award-winning international new media consulting company in the Collision Repair industry and I traveled across the country giving marketing lectures and meeting with major corporate clients. But I was deeply dissatisfied. It was during this moment of cognitive dissonance, dissatisfied and professionally successful, that Root.ED came to me.

The day is cloudless and the air is pure and fresh much like it is today. You can smell the conifers and feel the mountain breeze. I am halfway through Richard Louv's book, *Last Child In the Woods*, and I can feel the truth of his words vibrating through me. What am I doing here? Why have I allowed myself to stray from a truth I knew in early childhood? That nature brings me to life? Where is the young girl who sang to the full

moon at night and prayed and danced barefoot under the trees? It was in this space of inner turmoil that Root.ED was born. I spoke the name and vision in one breath to my brother and mentor that day. It sounded something like this, "I know what I want to do with my life! I want to teach children to claim their roots! I want to set them free and awaken them to their own knowing by empowering their parents to take them to the woods! It's called Root Education. It's a reminder to be rooted. It's healing. It's reconnecting. It's community medicine." I remember being so filled with knowing that I rose out of my chair as I spoke, my voice shaking with emotion, my hands rapid with shaping my ideas in the air before me. Those that know me know I'm a dreamer. They know ideas flow from me like water. But this, this was different. This was not idea-telling. This was truth-speaking. It was profoundly, deeply, wholly my gifts meeting the worlds' needs in the most sacred of ways. That was over six years ago. Much of my life since that moment has been toward this vision.

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### **Find Your Roots**

John Seed invites us all to, "turn inwards and stumble upon our true roots in the intertwining biology of this exquisite planet. May nourishment and power pulse through those roots, and fierce determination to continue the billion-year dance." How do we hold space for our own rootedness? How do we invite our roots to sink into the soothing rich earth of community and interconnection? How do we shed the bark-walled isolationism of modern life while staying connected to what nourishes and grounds us? These are questions I continue to ask on my ever emerging rooted journey. These are the questions that guide my own inquiry into wholeness. As Parker Palmer writes in his work *A Hidden Wholeness*:

*When we catch sight of the soul, we can become healers in a wounded world--in the family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in political life--as we are called back to our 'hidden wholeness' amid the violence of the storm...wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness--mine, yours, ours-- need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.*

*A Hidden Wholeness* is a call to living the undivided life which Palmer describes as a personal pathology that soon seeps into everyday life and relationships of all kinds as we detach from our core integrity as humans and become separated from the dance with our spirit that is so integral to a fulfilling and compassionate life. Much like Hermann Hesse's admiration for the unadulterated integrity of the tree, Palmer similarly cites trees as teachers of integrity and wholeness. Trees, doing more than adhering to a moral code, reach deep into the earth and out toward one another in a "state or quality of being entire, complete and unbroken...corresponding to its original (interconnected) condition." What is it your spirit is crying out for? What are the stories

you tell yourself each day? Are they contributing to the status quo through inaction or enacting violence, fear or despair on yourself or your expanding spiral of community? Storytelling is a choice. We choose the stories we invest in and these stories contribute to the neural pathways in our mind and to the collective human consciousness we all tap into each day.

Whether consciously or subconsciously we are linked at a cellular level to every single other cell on this planet, and just as the mycelial strands weave together the roots of trees beneath the dark, rich, soils of the earth carry information, nourishment, and evidence of suffering throughout the community, so too we experience in equal parts the immense well of love and of pain that our planetary community experiences. For you see, we are all One. We are each parts of the body of wholeness that weaves together our Universe and the challenge of our time is to leverage this knowledge, evidenced not only spiritually but in the many schools of advanced science worldwide, to hold our universal body gently and engage in our own Active Hope toward a connected and compassionate future. I have shared my story with you in the hope that some pieces resonate and can serve as medicine on your own Root.ED journey toward grief, compassionate interconnection, and renewal.

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## **Conclusion**

This is the story of my own journey, my own awakening to compassionate interconnection and the grief and painful apathy of our current paradigm. This spiraling path toward collective healing unintentionally invited me into the grief work of a lifetime and toward my own new way of Being. I encourage each of us to interrogate our biases as humans, to become aware of and inquire into our stories, and embody those stories so that we may share their medicine with others.

As I look to the future I am actively hopeful. I know we cannot passively await the changes we seek but rather square our shoulders, look deep within ourselves and find the power that makes us wish to dance and sing, to march and scream, to face the world and heal ourselves. For me that power comes from teaching but it also comes from interBeing. This requires a reckoning with my own privilege and my own consumer values and a shift toward truth-telling, grief work, and healing through a life lived close to the Earth. I am Becoming a teacher, farmer, storyteller, learner, healer. Who are you Becoming? How will you heal yourself and your communities? By reimagining my own future as an invitation to the wisdom of the past I too am invited to dance with new ways of Being. I did not set out to grow my own medicine but, as with most things, when we orient ourselves toward awareness, compassion, interconnection and truth-telling, what emerges is our own healing and renewal.



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### **Author's Note**

I wish to express my gratitude to the many individuals who have served as teachers, guides and mentors on my Root.ED journey. To all my relations, the hum and non-human Beings and ancestral ways of knowing that have served as a vast network of Belonging and connection during my own story of grief, compassion and renewal. To my parents, Bonnie and Gib Blackman who have always taught me the power of story and the deep importance of being rooted in compassionate service, joy, humility and community, thank you for being the seeds in my journey toward active hope. To my partner Brooke, the radiant woman who loves and supports me wholly, holds space for my many wild dreams and teaches me daily how to dance with my roots with truth, integrity and joy. To my brother, Forrest, for teaching me the magnetic power of humor and healing laughter. To my colleagues and classmates at the North Cascades Institute for challenging and encouraging me every step of the way and for collaborating with me endlessly so that I could discover deep stillness and hear the songs of my heart. To Nick Stanger for your unique gifts of discernment and space holding, thank you for guiding me on my journey of Transformative Inquiry and for modeling a new way of Teaching. To Joshua Porter for seeing and inviting the magic of my heart and for understanding the storytellers I most needed to hear from, you gave me the gift of poetic wildness. To Joanna Macy and her immensely nourishing Work That Reconnects, thank you for your wisdom and insight into new ways of knowing and being, you have been a wonderful guide on my own process of Becoming. For more information about Root.ED's work and mission you can visit us at [www.root-education.com](http://www.root-education.com) or contact me at [lizblackman@root-education.com](mailto:lizblackman@root-education.com). Thank you for reading and engaging with your own Root.ED stories.

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